Plans to Cut Nixon Staff Face Fight

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A bitter floor fight is expected in the House today over proposals to cut the White House staff, reduce staff salaries and trim funds for the Office of Management and Budget.

Republicans charge the proposals are simply Democratic attempts to strike back at the President "personally" and at the OMB for cutting off their "pet projects".

Democrats, on the other hand, say they aim at curbing the abuses that led to Watergate, by returning power to Cabinet officials.

'The target is the President, and this is open season on him," Rep. Ed Derwinski (R-Ill.) said.

"I can see it being played as the noble congressman on his white horse fighting the sinister White House personnel," Derwinski said. "And OMB has alienated many congressmen by cutting pet projects, so that makes them a target, too."

The proposals will be considered in two separate bills. One bill, authorizing staff support for the President would cut from 14 to five the number of administrative and staff assistants the President can appoint at a salary of $42,500 a year. It also fixes limits on the number of positions that can be filled at specific pay levels, instead of leaving pay levels within a certain range up to the President.

In addition, Rep. J. J. Pickle (D-Tex.), will offer amendments to: reduce the number of executive-level presidential assistants from 65 to 38; allow no more than 10 outside consultants and employees from other executive departments to be detailed to the President's staff, and require publication of a yearly summary of White House employees, salaries and job descriptions.

Pickle denies he is "out to get the President," but he admits that Watergate is one of the reasons he is offering his amendments.

"I'm concerned that we're doing great damage to the Cabinet system and creating an inner circle that governs in secret," he said. "I want to go back to the system of the Cabinet and President governing and not the staff."

Derwinski, a member of the Post Office and Civil Service Committee, which reported on the bill, called the moves "punitive" and said, "I don't think our committee would have looked at a proposal like this when Lyndon Johnson was President."

Pickle admits he did not attempt to reduce President Johnson's staff, but adds, "I think it has only been in the last few years that we've seen what's happening."

The attempt to reduce OMB's appropriation will come later in the day when the House takes up a money bill for the Treasury, Postal Service and other agencies.

The Appropriations committee only tentatively agreed to give OMB $22 million. which is $1.4 million below what the administration requested. Rep. Joseph Addabbo (D-N.Y.) says he will offer an amendment to lower it by as much as $6 million.

OMB Director Roy L. Ash infuriated the Appropriations Committee by ordering responsibility for patrolling the Mexican border against narcotics smugglers be taken from the Customs Bureau and given to the Immigration Service, without congressional authority.

Ash has backed down, deferring the switch until the House Government Operations Committee reviews it, but the bitterness lingers on.

Rep. Howard W. Robison (R-N.Y.) said the way to redress the problem is to strengthen Congress, not weaken the President. "It would be irresponsible to cut OMB funds until we get our congressional budget staff, set up by the budget reform bill, in place."